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- [Parade.com](#)
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July 2009

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		
« Jun			Aug »			

- [September 2009](#)
- [August 2009](#)
- [July 2009](#)
- [June 2009](#)
- [May 2009](#)
- [April 2009](#)
- [March 2009](#)
- [February 2009](#)
- [January 2009](#)
- [December 2008](#)
- [November 2008](#)
- [October 2008](#)
- [September 2008](#)
- [August 2008](#)
- [July 2008](#)
- [June 2008](#)
- [May 2008](#)
- [April 2008](#)
- [March 2008](#)
- [February 2008](#)
- [January 2008](#)
- [December 2007](#)
- [November 2007](#)
- [October 2007](#)
- [September 2007](#)
- [August 2007](#)
- [July 2007](#)
- [June 2007](#)
- [May 2007](#)
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[A YEAR LATER: Neighbors sick of seeing debris](#)

Lisa Roberson

ELYRIA — Living just a few houses from a pile of rubble, residents near the site of last year's massive factory fire do not need a calendar to tell them more than 365 days have passed since the first flicker of flame engulfed the former General Industries site.

Each day since, residents including Debbie Songer of Warren Avenue have lived with the knowledge that a site confirmed by the Ohio EPA to contain asbestos is a stone's throw from their front yards.

"We have to see that eyesore all the time," said the 49-year-old woman. "It's bad enough we don't know what damage it has already done to us."

While the smoke, soot and heat of last year's fire were intense enough to warrant the evacuation of several streets, the carcinogenic fibrous material lingering at the site now has residents worried. Less than a week after firefighters extinguished the blaze, the Ohio EPA confirmed that the former General Industries factory site contained high levels of asbestos in the debris.

Citing the safety of surrounding residents, the Ohio EPA ordered a security fence erected around the site until a comprehensive remediation plan could be devised.

However, in the year since, little work has been done at the site, and residents are left wondering how long they will have to live near a potential health hazard.

The site has not been cleaned because owner John Peshek has yet to come up with an approvable plan, state EPA officials said.

But that's little solace to residents, including Alicia Fuerstenberg, 22, who lives near the rubble with her twin 4-year-old sons.

"I don't understand how they can just let a broke-down building just sit there for a year," she said. "I don't know what could be happening. My kids play out here every day, all day, breathing in the air. I feel like I live in a war zone. You look outside, and you see a bunch of nothing. That's not what I want my boys to see every day."

Kathy C. Boylan, city health commissioner, said nearby residents have nothing to fear thanks in part to the rain.

"We have been very lucky," Boylan said. "With all the rain that we have had, much — if not all — of the asbestos is now way down below the surface. We've been blessed. We got a lot of rain last summer. And, we are getting a lot of rain this summer, so keeping it wet has not been a problem."

Boylan said the city Health Department has not received any complaints from residents in regard to visible emissions or health concerns.

In addition, the EPA sent an air quality inspector to check for visible emissions, as the danger of asbestos comes when large particles dry out and fine particles become airborne. When these fibers get into the air and are inhaled, they can cause significant health problems, including respiratory diseases.

The inspector, who visits the site sometimes as often as weekly, has found nothing of concern.

Meanwhile, Rita Truxall, 59, who lives on Lexington Avenue, said it is hard to forget the fire that made her fear she wouldn't have a house left when it was all over.

That night, she was awakened by her husband to find the smell of burning chemicals in the air.

"It was unbelievable what we saw," she said. "Big pieces of shingle from the roof of the building landed in our yard, and my husband stayed up all night hosing down our roof just to keep our house from catching on fire. I just kept wondering if I was going to have a house when everything was over."

The fire raged for more than 16 hours, and it took a lot of effort to contain.

Flames shot more than 200 feet in the air, and superheated air melted the sides of nearby buildings. The Elyria Fire Department, aided by nearly every fire department in Lorain County and several from Medina and Cuyahoga counties worked to keep the fire from spreading beyond the General Industries complex.

Fire Capt. Joe Pronesti, who was interim chief at the time, said it was immediately clear that the fire was moving too fast to send firefighters inside. Instead, fire officials decided to let it burn out and focused their efforts on protecting nearby homes and businesses, including Valley Natural Gas at 151 Olive St., which has large outdoor propane and oxygen tanks.


It is a decision for which residents say they remain grateful. Now, they wish some decision would be made to get rid of the pile of rubble.

"Just think of the kids who could go in there, thinking it's fun, or the thieves who think they could make a quick buck from the scrap metal?" Songer said. "There are just so many risks. By now, someone should realize that if the owner could clean it up, he would have. How many years will we have to look at this before something is done?"

Contact Lisa Roberson at 329-7121 or lroberson@chroniclet.com.

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 Filed by [Lisa Roberson](#) July 4th, 2009 in [BREAKING](#), [Top Stories](#).

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3 Responses to "A YEAR LATER: Neighbors sick of seeing debris"

1.  [Wakeupelyria](#) says:
[July 4, 2009 at 10:19 am](#)

What happened to the investigation concerning the communication between the building department and the fire department? I believed it died because the administration did not want their part in this mess to come to light.


What former assistant safety service director was working on community development when this company moved to Elyria? I believe that it was current safety service director chris eichenlaub. He is the one that brought John Peshek and his business into our town.

Could that relationship be the base for the rumor that he also "suggested" that the building department look for ways to help John Peshek re-open the building.

If this is true there was not any miscommunication between the fire department and the building department; rather a mis-directive given to the building department.

I believe that city council needs to require an independent review to determine what really happened and why Mr. Peshek was allowed to re-open the building.

[\(Report comment\)](#)

2.  [Eatown](#) says:
[July 4, 2009 at 11:46 pm](#)

and the plot thickens.... cant wait to find out what happens at the end; like if they get the bad guy.

[\(Report comment\)](#)

3. [Eatown](#) says:
[July 6, 2009 at 8:27 am](#)

Ok, you got me; my curiosity is growing. is peshek the owner of the building? you mention a re-opening. is that before this fire last year? and why would the building have to be re-opened? was it closed already and why?

i remember this fire, not up close; but i could see the smoke in the distance from my house. it wasnt til the night time that i found out what the smoke was from.

the way you guys post on here, sounds like elyria needs an independent review on the entire city.

[\(Report comment\)](#)

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